

PBS MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR
13 April 1984

NICARAGUA/
FIGHTING

MACNEIL: The Nicaraguan army said its troops are successfully holding off an attack by a force of rebel contras at the seaport of San Juan del Norte on the Atlantic Ocean, a few miles from Nicaragua's border with Costa Rica. The contras claim they captured the town, but the Nicaraguan government said its men are holding on after three days of fighting had inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. The anti-government force called Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, which is based in Costa Rica, said it has 450 men equipped with anti-aircraft missiles attacking San Juan del Norte. The attackers said they want to use the port as a base for more attacks against Nicaragua. The contras, whose mining of Nicaragua's harbors with CIA help has created such a political furor in Washington, have also been using mines on land. They say land mines planted on roads near the town of *Puerto Cabezas, close to the Honduran border, have blown up at least three Nicaraguan trucks. To tell us more about the contras military effort and how it would be affected if U.S. aid were cut off, we have retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel John Buchanan. Colonel Buchanan was in the Marine Corps for 22 years. He flew 223 combat missions in Vietnam. He's closely followed the military situation in Central America and has made many trips there. He's currently a consultant to the Center for Development Policy in Washington. Colonel Buchanan, how successful have the contras been in the two years they've been waging this fight against the Sandinistas. LT. COL. JOHN BUCHANAN (U.S. Marine Corps, Retired): Robin, to date they have not been militarily effective. Their mission has been to harass the Sandinista government in order to encourage repression and disaffection with the government and economically to cause sabotage and bring 'em down. They've not been very effective thus far.

MACNEIL: That has been their only mission, to, to harass and to cause disaffection? It has not been their mission to try and overthrow the Sandinistas? BUCHANAN: One of their aims, personal aims for them was to break off the northern area, probably Nuevo Segovia, and declare it a liberated zone and set up a government there. They've not been successful in that, and they've not been too successful in harassing the government.

MACNEIL: What have they achieved? BUCHANAN: So far, I can't say that they've achieved very much as, as far as their goals. They have achieved the purpose in the nation of Nicaragua of consolidating the support behind the Sandinista government.

Continued

MACNEIL: Could it not be said, as the administration has claimed, that the con, the pressure the contras have brought, including economic dislocation, has brought the Sandinistas, Sandinista government closer to wanting to negotiate and to conform to what Washington would like it to do? BUCHANAN: Perhaps, Robin, there is some truth in that, but the purpose of military action by any nation is to, against another nation, is to bring the other one around to a negotiating position. And any military achievements we've made against the Sandinista government has not been followed by any effort at negotiations. So it's basically aimed at a military overthrow or an overthrow of the Sandinistas, as far as I can see.

MACNEIL: So just looking at it militarily speaking, you would say that the government in Managua still easily has the upper hand in this? BUCHANAN: That's correct. We, the United States government has expended tremendous political energy and capital on building an infrastructure in Honduras to support the contras. And I think they see that the contras are ineffective and are trying to make a final push here, ah, in my opinion.

MACNEIL: If this mining controversy results in Congress disallowing further aid to the contras, U.S. financial aid to the contras, what will be the result of that?

BUCHANAN: If they disavow aid to the contras, I think the contras are gonna fall on their swords. I heard today or read today where they thought they would go to some Third World Nations, and I won't name 'em because I don't think it's fair to even make those kind of implications, they would go to Third World nations and get money to fund it. I don't believe they could. I believe that there would be a little money coming in from Miami and the supporters from that region. But it takes tremendous money to fly the helicopters, the DC-3s, to provide the support, the

ships to take in the cargo. Only the United States can supply the contras, no one else.

MACNEIL: So you believe the contras, does that mean you think the contra effort would collapse? BUCHANAN: I believe it would.

MACNEIL: So the price of the mining controversy would be the collapse of the contra effort. BUCHANAN: Well, I....

MACNEIL: If, if it resulted in the Congress saying no more aid. BUCHANAN: If it resulted in them saying no more aid, it'd probably be the end of the contras. They might stay there for 15, 20 years, be gray-haired old bandits rustling cattle across the border, but that's about it.

Continued

3.

MACNEIL: Can the U.S., for instance, with its installations in Honduras, help the contras without money? I mean, supposing the Congress said no more financial aid to the contras. I mean, are there, are there other ways the U.S. could help the contras? BUCHANAN: I think it would be difficult over the long term. We've built a infrastructure where we have ports and airfields that we can bring in the supplies, fly 'em to the border regions in support of the contras and further fly 'em down deep into Nicaragua, which we are now doing in supplying the contras from base camps. But without that support and without the large-scale money to, to, for the funds for the fuel, for the funds for the ammunition and the medical support, I don't think they could do it, Robin.

MACNEIL: How have, have the contras forces grown in the years they've been fighting with U.S. aid? Have they attracted some more following to their cause? BUCHANAN: Well, I think we have to historically look at the region where the guerrillas forces are drawing their support from, and that's Nueva Segovia. That region has always been anti-government, I don't care which government it was, anti-authoritarian. They followed Sandino against the Marines. They were liberal versus conservative and so on, ah, Sandinistas versus Samozá. And there are a lot of people in that northern region who are closely associated with the Sandinistas by blood, by relationship and the relationship of being former national guardsmen and descendents and brothers and so on. So they have some of, they have some support in that region and about that region only. But they also have a great deal of opposition in that region.

MACNEIL: I see. But has their support been growing? Is there, are the various contra factions much larger than they were a year ago? BUCHANAN: I wouldn't think they were terribly significantly larger. They've grown some, but to grow from 5,000 or 6,000 to 8,000 with the, when you figure the question of unemployment in Honduras for 'em and all the other problems, it's much easier to be a soldier on the CIA payroll than it is to go out and grub for beans and tortillas.

MACNEIL: Yeah. Well, so on, when you sum it all up, you, ah, you, as somebody who's looking at them militarily, you don't seem very impressed with the contras effort. BUCHANAN: The last time I saw the contra people that I talked to, they were pretty well shell-shocked. I've seen

Continued

4

their hospital and heard reports on their hospitals. I'm not saying they're probably individually not courageous and brave men. I don't wanna cast any reflection on their bravery, but I don't think militarily they're being successful. I don't think they're going to overthrow the Sandinistas. I think the net result of the administration program is only to increase the support for the government in Nicaragua, in Managua. I think without the four-year program we've had, ah, long ago, the disaffection would have probably been at a different scale and taken a different form. But right now we're just building cohesion for them.